



Planning & Development Committee

March 2, 2009 Hearing

Testimony by Shelby Mertes, Partnership for Strong Communities

I am testifying to highlight the connections between housing in Connecticut and the smart growth legislation being considered today.

The Partnership for Strong Communities is a nonprofit organization dedicated to raising public awareness and advancing policy solutions to create affordable housing and build healthy and economically vital communities, and end chronic homelessness.

I would like to comment on three bills before you today:

HB 6467 – An Act Concerning Smart Growth and Plans of Conservation and Development

The goal of defining smart growth and then tying funding and programmatic decisions to that is worthwhile, but we're concerned with the definition as it's currently written. The definition in section 1 refers to:

"(E) affordable and available housing for mixed income households in close proximity to transportation and employment centers".

We instead recommend:

"promotes...(E) development or preservation of workforce or affordable housing through densities that reduce sales prices or rents, including in locations proximate to transportation or employment centers".

As currently written, it's unclear how "available" housing would be defined. Also the term "mixed income households" is unclear, which could mean any household with two people making different incomes, but I'm sure that's not what was intended.

Because this definition will drive funding and policy, we're concerned that the definition could be interpreted that only housing in close proximity to transportation and employment centers would be allowed or funded. Not only could this run the risk of restricting development of housing we desperately need, but it may not be smart growth. There are areas of the state that are away from major transit, but where development pressure is strong - Litchfield County for example. Attempts to limit housing production there could result in more large-lot zoning that has so far driven sprawl. It could also lead to the people employed there having to drive long distances from where they're able to afford housing – and we know the best transportation and environmental policy is to help people live close to work. We believe the best solution is not to entirely restrict development, but to encourage more compact development like in village centers. Higher allowed density, along with infrastructure and other investments, can encourage developers to build there instead of the outlying areas the state wants to preserve.

HB 6588 – An Act Concerning Training For Local Land Use Commissioners

We believe better training for local land use commissioners would greatly improve housing development. Not only would it result in better decision-making, but it could speed up the approval process. Many land use commissioners are volunteers, without adequate planning staff support. Local commissions often put the brakes on sensible development – unnecessarily – because they don't know the best practices that can manage land use complexity. The impact on housing development is enormous – time is money, and a slower permitting process costs developers more, which then gets passed on to renters and homeowners.

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We also feel comfortable with UConn's CLEAR providing this training. They provide a valuable service for municipalities. We'd encourage trainings to include as much coverage of housing-related issues as possible.

We are concerned about potential ramifications of Subsection (c) allowing training and expertise of land use commissioners to be considered in court cases. Training is very important, and we should encourage it. But land use commissioners are volunteers who already have many demands upon them, and towns sometimes have trouble finding volunteers to serve. Exposing these individuals to increased legal scrutiny could discourage people from serving. It is also unclear how the court would interpret commissioners' level of experience – whether lack of training would excuse a mistake made, or make the town more at fault.

HB 6466 – An Act Concerning Projects of Regional Significance

We support this opportunity for developers – on a voluntary basis – to gain a clear understanding early in the process of what state and local agencies will expect of them. If done well, it could quicken the development process. Again, time is money, and clarity of process helps.

Finally, let me update you on Connecticut's housing situation, and urge to you keep in mind the state's housing needs as you craft a smart growth strategy. The Partnership for Strong Communities tracks the housing market closely, and I can tell you that despite some softening, the need for affordable housing hasn't gone away.

- Homebuilders and realtors report that modest-sized, modest-priced housing units are still selling and renting. We still have an undersupply in this part of the market that is most needed by our younger workers and families.
- Connecticut is 47th among the states in its rate of housing production per capita; Connecticut has not kept up with demand, which has driven up prices.
- Connecticut has lost its 25-34 year old population faster than any other state since 2000, largely due to high housing costs.
- Before the recession, lack of housing was constraining job growth, and unless we create more housing, it may constrain job growth and our economy again as Connecticut tries to emerge from the recession.

The state's HOMEConnecticut program is making progress on meeting these challenges. Run by OPM, it offers planning grants and financial incentives to municipalities that zone for higher density, mixed-income housing in sensible locations like downtowns, near transit, near job centers and in redeveloped brownfields. 46 municipalities have applied for planning grants to consider how to best enact Incentive Housing Zones, and 33 of those have been approved so far.

The HOMEConnecticut program uses a novel approach, which not only will provide desperately-needed housing, but begins to shape Connecticut's development patterns in a helpful way. This approach to land use can:

- reduce sprawl
- relieve development pressure from open space and farmland
- help people live in walking distance of rail and bus
- reduce road congestion and auto emissions
- help mitigate climate change

We've come to understand that housing is not only compatible with other needs, it actually can help land preservation, transit, brownfield redevelopment and other smart growth goals.

I thank the committee for considering this package of bills, and the Smart Growth Working Group for generating many of these ideas. It is critical to Connecticut's economy and communities that we foster more coordinated land use policies and investments on housing, transportation, land preservation, economic development, urban redevelopment, historic preservation and more, into a strategy to use our land and resources most efficiently and balance the many interconnected needs we face. It is challenging but rewarding work – thank you for your focus on this. And thank you for being mindful of the important role of housing in this mix.